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Haasler, Simone

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The Impact of Learning on Women's Labour Market Transitions

SIMONE R. HAASLER
Centre for Labour and Political Education, University of Bremen, Germany

ABSTRACT Women play an increasingly important role in the labour market and as wage earners. Moreover, in many countries, young women have outperformed men in terms of educational attainment and qualification. Still, women's human capital investment does not pay off as it does for men as they are still significantly disadvantaged on the labour market. Based on a qualitative empirical investigation with women in their mid-career, this article investigates the role of learning for women's labour market participation and career paths. Women's careers complexly intersect with role expectations, family needs, the career of the partner and anticipation of low returns of educational investment. This is typically reflected in discontinuous employment, part-time work and women's secondary wage earner position in the family. Furthermore, women qualified at the intermediate skills level are more likely to move horizontally in their career than vertically. Horizontal mobility thereby requires significant engagement with learning as the German labour market usually requires a formal qualification to realise a career change. Learning and further training thus become instrumental to facilitate and support women's career transitions, which are often aimed at re-entering regular employment after longer periods of family-related interruptions and/or to remain qualified in jobs in the social, health and educational fields, all of which are female dominated. Ultimately, women's significant engagement with continuing learning is not primarily expected to support career advancement and vertical mobility, particularly as it can neither alter discontinuities of employment nor the German-specific nexus between welfare, family and education policies and the labour market. This challenges the lifelong learning rhetoric insofar as one key aim of lifelong learning policies is to support labour market inclusion and the mobility of disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

It is well documented that gender inequalities persist as a pervasive feature of labour markets across the world despite the increasingly important role women play in the labour market. Today, they represent 40% of the employed world population; in 2009, 50% of working age women (i.e. 15 years and older in most countries) were in gainful employment (International Labour Office, 2010). Alongside tertiarisation and the general transformation of the economy, female labour force participation in Germany has been constantly growing from 52% in 1980 to 71% in 2010 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2012).

Despite this remarkable increase, the opportunities for full and productive employment remain limited for women as compared to men. This concerns among other aspects: women's access to paid work (United Nations, 2011); occupational segregation (Haasler & Gottschall, 2014); income opportunities and salary growth (Bispinck, 2013); pay differentials (OECD, 2013a); and career progression routes (OECD, 2012). As a result, women continue to struggle to overcome fundamental disadvantages in labour markets. For large parts, these disadvantages derive from discrimination, which follows similar patterns across national contexts, even if these reflect varying

structural embeddedness in terms of economic conditions, employment structures, education and training systems, family policies and social networks (Bimrose et al, 2014).[1] Discrimination and labour market segmentation by gender lead to specific employment patterns of women, which in conservative welfare regimes like Germany reflect part-time work, discontinuities of employment and, not uncommonly, precarious work (Hofmeister et al, 2006).

Based on an explorative study into women's labour market transitions, the following article seeks to investigate the role of learning for women's labour market participation. Quantitative studies have shown that the nexus of regime-specific labour market features (e.g. the share of the public sector, flexible versus protected employment) and family policies (in particular the availability of and state support for childcare) determine women's labour market participation (Hofäcker, 2006). In addition, qualitative studies underline that educational and labour market experience, as well as social influences, are highly significant in directing women's careers. Role expectations, family needs, the career of the partner and social networks act as main influencing social factors when women are making career decisions (Bimrose et al, forthcoming 2015). Strategies of compromise thereby present a dominant mode of adjustment, reflecting how women aim to accommodate different and sometimes contradicting expectations when shaping their individual careers. Conflicts may, for example, arise when seeking to align family demands with economic needs to secure an income and own professional interests. On the other hand, compromising may also reflect experiences of constraints, for example when women did not realise their own career aspirations or as a response to discrimination at the workplace. A recent German study into the work trajectories of women aged between 45 and 60 showed that, for this generation, parents' expectations and traditional role models could be highly influential for career decisions, resulting in women following lower qualification routes and less ambitious career pathways than those to which they had originally aspired (Haasler, forthcoming 2015). While these results broadly conform to the gender norms predominating when these women were socialised and entered employment some decades ago [2], the question remains why women today are still significantly disadvantaged on the labour market despite their important role as wage earners (Buchholz & Grunow, 2006) and the fact that they have outperformed men in terms of educational attainment and qualification in many industrialised countries (OECD, 2013b). While this reflects a high commitment to learning, for some reasons women's human capital investment does not pay off as it does for men, even in the twenty-first century. As will be argued, this is not only the case for initial education and training, but also for investments in continuing training later in life.

As drawing on career theory to explain why female careers remain different from those of men and are subject to several constraints has proven difficult (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Bimrose, 2008), this article follows an inductive and hermeneutic approach. The aim is to better understand how women's individual careers intersect with learning and transition processes. By focusing on women in their mid-career, both initial and continuing learning experiences can be contextualised against current and past employment, as well as future career expectations. Mid-career is distinguished from other career stages as individuals have acquired skills and mastery in an occupational field, are established in their role, and usually have few thoughts of disengagement or retirement (Hall, 1986). At the same time, they tend to reflect about whether past career opportunities were constraint and/or future career advancement may be uncertain. For this stage, the concept of transition is particularly useful for further analysis. During periods of transition individuals find themselves at a crossroads, being put in a situation of decision making to path the way for their future work trajectory. Mid-career transitions (be they voluntary or involuntary) often reflect a review process, whereby the individual seeks to reclaim aspects of the self that have not been allowed expression due to the prioritisation of other aspects of life. This reflective process may also lead to modifying the current career path in an attempt to allow expression of suppressed talents, interests and values (Slay et al, 2004). In addition, the concept of transition accounts for women's high levels of employment discontinuities and job mobility, as well as for the increasingly contingent work-life course (Heinz, 2003). Thereby, transitions may not be restricted to status passages (e.g. from school-to-work), job changes or career progression. Rather, horizontal mobility, often as a result of reskilling, could be identified as the most important career transition for women in their mid-career. This is often connected to family-related interruptions and the adjustment of skills to secure employment and/or women's reintegration into the labour market.

Taking account of the role of transitions for structuring career paths, the article first contextualises women's careers against the nexus between the vocational training system, the labour market and family policies. This is connected to the rise of female labour force participation and expansion of the service sector, which have led to ambiguous effects as concerns discontinuous employment, precarious working conditions and limited career opportunities for women. Section 3 introduces the methods and the narrative approach of the empirical investigation to then sketch (in section 4) the learning and work trajectories of women in their mid-career. The focus is thereby placed on how learning and transitions structured their past career development and current employment situation. The results are integrated and discussed in section 5, while section 6 finally links the conclusions to implications for labour market policies.

Contextual Framework: the nature of gendered careers [3] in Germany

In Germany, like in most European countries, the rapid increase of female labour force participation between the 1960s and 1990s was fuelled by tertiarisation and the expansion of the public sector, including social services, during this same period. Additionally, German reunification since the 1990s further contributed to the rise of the female workforce, reflecting the tradition of dual-earner couples in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). During the same period, labour market segmentation by gender has become more pronounced not only in terms of sectoral segmentation, but also in terms of working time, pay structures and representation in job hierarchies. While this has partly created a so-called ‘pink-collar' ghetto (Charles & Grusky, 2004), the profiles and extent of this segmentation vary significantly between countries (Schäfer et al, 2012). In an international comparative perspective, two characteristic features of the German welfare state and economy significantly contribute to upholding gendered careers: first, the specific connection between skill formation and the labour market, and, second, the prevalence of the male breadwinner model that makes it likely for women to remain the secondary wage earner.

Skill formation and vocational socialisation do not only provide individuals with a particular set of vocational skills, qualifications and orientations, but also function as a means of social integration both at the level of job hierarchies and the labour market in general. Thus, individuals are assigned a social status based on the division of labour derived from vocational profiles with specific income stratification and career progression routes (Hanf, 2011). Skilled workers (Facharbeiter), often referred to as the backbone of the German economy, can rely on institutionalised patterns of career progression and benefit from skills protection and social security compared to, for example, unskilled workers (Baethge & Baethge-Kinsky, 1998). The Facharbeiter career is furthermore associated with full-time, continuous and protected employment and collective workers' participation rights, parameters which in Germany constitute the basis of the social security system and the derived benefits.

This is relevant in so far as the Facharbeiter prototype career has been established for male workers in industry and is hence only to a limited extent accessible for female workers. Actually, most of the rise of female labour force participation since the 1990s has been in the segment of nonstandard and marginal employment (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2012).[4] When it comes to working time arrangements, gender differences are particularly marked. In 2012, women held 87% of all regular part-time employment of less than 20 hours per week and 81% of all marginal employment contracts (Fromm & Bartelheimer, 2012). These include the so called mini- and midi-jobs that restrict workers to a maximum wage of €450 or €850 per month, respectively, and imply only limited or no contribution to the social security system. Marginal employment combined with low wages translates into considerable disadvantages in terms of entitlement to social security and retirement benefits.

The high proportion of the female workforce in non-standard employment correlates with the high share of women employed in the service sector, including social services. That social services remain female dominated is, in turn, closely linked to the German qualification system. Over the last century, a parallel structure of ‘dual' vocational routes for men and ‘school-based' vocational routes for women has been established. This resulted in the bifurcation of training structures and labour market opportunities and the persistent reproduction of gendered professions. The crafts-based apprenticeship model that was introduced for the training of skills

required for industry and complemented by vocational schools between 1890 and 1920 aimed at supplying the newly emerging factories with standardised skills (Greinert, 2007; Hanf, 2007). Almost at the same time full-time vocational schools were established for educational fields, social work, nursing and other areas, which did not form part of the crafts or industrial training system of skilled labour. These schools were targeted to provide a decent vocational education for young girls to prepare them for their roles as housewives or governess or other jobs in personal services in case they were seeking gainful employment (Kleinau & Mayer, 1996).

From this tradition, there developed female-connoted vocational training paths related to social, educational and medical fields, such as childcare, nursing, elderly care, speech therapy, physiotherapy, and so on (Friese, 2013), covering today more than 100 professional domains. Whilst the school-based vocational routes also cover both theoretical and work-based training, they differ from the approximately 350 dual apprenticeship schemes in that they are not equally standardised and nationally regulated by the Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz) (Füssel & Leschinsky, 2008; Hanf, 2011). Regulated at the federal level, school-based vocational routes display non-standardised and heterogeneous curricula and training providers, which are difficult to assess in terms of their numbers and the quality of training they provide. Hence, the related professional areas are less regulated (with the exception of nursing) [5], are anchored predominantly in personal services, provide restricted career development pathways and lower salaries (as compared to the male-dominated professions of the dual system), and display 70% female representation against 41% in the dual system (Hall, 2012). In addition, most training programmes require fees and relatively high entry qualifications. At the same time, there are also female-dominated, crafts-based professions like hairdressing, seamstressing, floristry, cookery or sales, which form part of the dual system. Salaries in these professions are even lower than in the social and care professions, exemplifying the growing proportion of low-wage sectors that particularly affect female workers. In 2010, about one third of all full-time employed women worked in low-wage sectors (Garloff & Machning, 2011, p. 17).

The diffusion of the service sector has led to several reforms of the vocational training system. Returns on investment in the female-dominated vocational paths in terms of salary levels and career opportunities, however, remain comparatively lower as compared to most dual training programmes in industry and production (Krüger, 2004; Hall, 2012). That this pattern persists and interconnects with a high share of female marginal employment can be explained by several factors. On the one hand, women continue to carry most of the household and family responsibilities despite the fact that they also increasingly contribute to the household income (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [BMFSFJ], 2011; OECD, 2012). In Germany, this is supported by family policies that make it difficult for women with children to pursue a continued career over their life course (Haasler, forthcoming 2015), with an insufficient childcare infrastructure being one of the main hurdles (Keck & Saraceno, 2013). On the other hand, more than 80% of the female workforce resides in the service sector, which relies on a high proportion of non-standard employment as compared to employment in industry. The service sector is furthermore characterised by low average wages. For example, over the past two decades, wage structures in this sector have shown considerable less pay increase as compared to jobs of the same qualification level in core industries (Bispinck, 2013). Both factors interplay with the tax system that rewards a stratified income structure among married couples (single-earner families in particular) (Mühling & Schwarze, 2011) and the gender pay gap, which is, with 21%, particularly high in Germany as compared to other European countries (OECD, 2013a).[6] For a married dual-earner couple with children, this specific constellation provides strong incentives for the woman (who is more likely to be in flexible and lower remunerated employment than her partner) to reduce her working hours or stay home with the children altogether. In 2007, 44.6% of all German households with children followed the male breadwinner model with the man working full-time and the woman working part-time (BMFSFJ, 2011). By contrast, in other European countries, more diversified wage earner models prevail (Lewis & Giullari, 2005).

Methods

The empirical results presented in this article derive from biographical interviews with 14 women in their mid-career conducted in Germany between 2012 and 2013. This qualitative investigation formed part of a broader comparative study in five European countries that investigated how learning can support individuals' labour market transitions. By looking at how adults established in their careers navigate their ways through changing labour markets, the aim was to identify and understand some key influencing factors that help individuals to manage career transitions so as to support their individual career development (see Brown, 2014).

The comparative study followed a common research and methodological approach across the five participating countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Spain). The methodological coordination concerned, in particular, the sampling and the narrative method (see Barabasch & Merrill, 2014). First, the target group was defined as to represent the main part of the active population, excluding groups at risk (e.g. the young, the long-term unemployed, migrants), high level career pathways (e.g. lawyers, medical doctors), and those for which continuing training is a (formal) requirement. Given the primacy of the vocational route in Germany, the focus was placed on the intermediate skills level up to and including bachelor degree level, but not professionals in higher management positions. All participants were selected on the basis that they had performed middle-range jobs for at least five years and so had substantial work experience. Furthermore, individuals were to have had experienced various labour market transitions. Those in a current transition process at the time of the interview were re-interviewed after about one year to facilitate a more in-depth analysis of how they managed this particular transition. From the German sample (detailed in Table I) [7], 9 of the 14 women had a second interview.[8]

	Name	Gender	Age	Relational status	Employment status	Highest qualification	Current employment
1	Nina*	f	30	Married, two children	Part-time, currently on maternity leave	Certified business communication clerk	Administrative support at a regional radio station
2	Andrea*	f	35	Married, three children	Part-time (marginal employment of 10 hours per week)	Realschulabschluss, certified physiotherapist	Physiotherapist specialised in working with children with special needs
3	Brigitte*	f	36	Married, one child	Permanent, full-time	Berufsakademie	Vocational advisor
4	Anna*	f	36	Married, no children (but pregnant)	Full-time temporary contract (still in the probation period)	Commercial college, certified assistant tax accountant; certified nursery teacher	Nursery teacher in a kindergarten of special education
5	Silke	f	40	Married, two children	Regular part-time and freelancing	Abitur	Writer for advertising texts
6	Barbara*	f	41	Divorced, single mother (two children)	Part-time, regular employment (29 hours per week)	Educator/nursery teacher (from former GDR with West-German accreditation)	Nursery teacher/pedagogue working with children with special needs
7	Sandra	f	43	Married, two children	Part-time (75%)	Abitur; certified masseur and speech therapist	Speech therapist
8	Anke*	f	44	Single mother, two children	In activation scheme	Completion of secondary school (Realschule)	Working in a museum/ cultural institution under an activation programme

9	Sabine	f	44	Living with partner, no children	Regular, part-time (30 hours per week)	Fachabitur, certified pediatric nurse	Pediatric nurse in a neurological rehabiliation centre working with children, youth and adult patients
10	Fatma	f	45	Married, three grown-up children	Regular employment	Hauptschulabschluss, trained as furrier and certified elderly nurse	Elderly care nurse after redirecting her career in 2005 (before she worked as furrier and seemstress and for 14 years as
11	Gabi	f	Mid-forties	Married, two children	Regular, part-time (20 hours per week)	Bank clerk assistant (Sparkassenkauffrau)	Bank clerk
12	Karin*	f	46	With partner and two children	Part-time, regular (60%)	Fachabitur Further qualification as midwifery assistant	Prop master in a theatre
13	Claudia*	f	47	With partner and grown-up child	Regular, full-time	Trained bank clerk	Bank clerk/service manager
14	Britta*	f	48	Single mother, one child	Unemployed	Gardener	Gardener, currently unemployed with some informal jobs

*Interviewed twice.

Table 1. German female sample (all names are pseudonyms).

Second, the interview approach combined narratives with an interview themes guide. In account of the intersection of learning and career paths, the main themes included: relevant skills development; key learning experiences (including informal learning); significant work and learning transitions; support structures to manage transitions; anticipated future career developments; and lessons learned from previous career changes and transitions (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014). In addition, socio-demographic data, educational background, learning trajectories and the current job situation were specifically addressed. The interviews took 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The strength of combining the theme-based interview method with a narrative approach is that it allows for text analysis away from interpreting the narrative as an individual case so as to identify topics and patterns that appear across the different narratives.[9] For the analysis presented in the following section, three main topics were identified by means of horizontal analysis based on communalities and differences between participants with regard to their work and learning trajectories, transition experiences, and individual perceptions. Here, the focus was placed on participants' reflections upon their working life as biographical elements by at the same time delineating patterns of learning and career adjustments across all narratives. This approach underlines the participants' roles as actors in the process of shaping their own work biography, thereby accounting for the dynamic interaction between individuals' actions, normative standards, and institutional structures. In the interview situation the individual is considered to be a carrier of purposeful actions, reflecting concerns for structural risks and chances, decision-making processes, and personal values. Individuals can thus be considered ‘experts' when it comes to interpreting and making sense of the institutional structures that influence how their careers develop. They themselves have to resolve conflicts, align their personal and professional interests, and integrate divergent experiences into a coherent ‘story'. The approach hence facilitates a hermeneutic process aimed at identifying sense-making structures that can explain individuals' actions and conceptions of reality. This is supported by an interactive process of interpretation through a reiterative way of

relating thoughts, ideas, questions and further information. Whilst all the biographical information are interpreted retrospectively, incorporating experiences and learning processes that have occurred in the meantime, the reconstructions make us understand how people are able to cope with their present situation (Witzel, 1996).

Understanding Women's Work Transitions

The presented women's trajectories reveal three dominants modes of adjustment around which learning and transitions are structured. These have been categorised as (i) balancing work and the family; (ii) securing stable employment; and (iii) seeking professional fulfilment. In the following, the narratives are classified according to these three dominant modes identified as ‘key drivers' of transitions, thus having a structuring effect on the women's individual careers. This does not mean, however, that other aspects were not important or not considered when making career decisions.

Individual careers are thereby understood as to reflect a response to social structure, which is reflected in institutional frameworks – and their opportunities and constraints – but also to role expectations and normative ideas about employment, qualification routes and gender. Different sets of expectations about career choices are framed within clear opportunity structures, which reflect the tension between openness and flexibility and structured pathways (Roberts, 2009). This is well reflected in the illustrated cases below.

Transitions and Learning Structured around Balancing Work and the Family

Recurrent issues emerged in the interviews in the context of women seeking to combine their professional life and interests with family demands. Hence, one dominant theme evolved around balancing their divergent and sometimes conflicting commitments. This was an issue for women who had prioritised their family commitments over professional interests, but also for those who had prioritised their working life and own career.

Nina, for example, seeks to balance a pronounced work orientation with her family life in a fairly traditional way, accommodating the career of her husband and own family values by working part-time (20 hours per week) and having switched to less challenging work when she returned to work after one year of parental leave. Nina has two small children and structures her life around a strong family dedication, but at the same time she also displays a strong work orientation. Work thereby fulfils a social, networking and recognition function rather than personal fulfilment, securing an income or realising a career. Nina has had several career changes in pursuit of securing employment and a job she likes, but without following any particular career or learning ambitions. Except for her initial training and some training-on-the-job, learning thus far has not played any significant role for Nina's work transitions. All transitions were, in the first place, well planned to accommodate her family needs, but also not to risk her job. The quote below illustrates Nina's assurance of prioritising her family over work, while at the same time it also picks up the issue of gender roles:

> For me it was absolutely clear that if I would have wanted to make a career then only without having children. For me this does not go together. I don't say it's not possible, but I wouldn't have wanted it for myself. For me, if I decide to have children, it was clear that I then subordinate any career interests to my children's wellbeing and that I rather take the time to take care of my children, to be able to care for them well … I am sure that there are many women who can manage it differently, but I wouldn't have wanted it for myself. (1st interview, translated from German)

Also prioritising her family, Andrea, married with three children (nine, seven and four years), has been in marginal employment as a physiotherapist (working ten hours per week) since she has had her first child. However, in her biography, learning plays a key role. While being home with the children she has pursued several major specialisation courses, most recently to specialise in child physiotherapy. Deepening her expertise and becoming more specialised is in line with following a clear professional track and her ambition to gradually increase her working hours over the next years. In her field, however, it is unlikely that her investments in continuous training will facilitate

any form of career progression. Rather it is a requirement to get back into regular employment in the future. Increasing engagement with work and working more hours, but feeling unable to do so because of family commitments, was also an issue for Barbara, Gabi and Britta. Britta stopped working when she had her child 15 years ago and has remained unemployed ever since. Engagement with learning and several further training courses have turned into a compensating strategy for lack of work opportunities, leading to a 'learner career' whereby learning has lost its primary purpose of getting her back into employment. Gabi switched to work part-time (20 hours per week) after having been on parental leave for six years. Like Nina, she supports the career of her husband and sees her role as the 'coordinator of the family and the household'. Working as assistant bank clerk who trained in the former GDR, Gabi finds herself at the lower end of the career ladder in the bank and has remained at the service point ever since. Even if she had the opportunity to work more hours, she does not see herself progressing any further in her career as competition from younger, more highly qualified colleagues is strong. Gabi would neither have the energy nor the resources to undergo another major retraining to develop a competitive skills profile. Barbara, a single mother with two teenage sons, trained in the former GDR as nursery teacher. She has been working part-time (29 hours per week) in an institution caring for children with special needs for 15 years. Barbara had higher career ambitions which, however, she abandoned in the political turmoil of the German reunification. Later she had to give priority to secure an income as a single mother:

> It would have been possible [to study], yes. But then we had the reunification. And I was young and nobody knew what would come next. We were all lost in a way, not knowing which way to take at the age of 19 and I just wanted to live. I wanted to live that freedom, I wanted to be free.
> And then I just got a job, mainly also because I wanted to earn the money from the West I had been longing for for so long [laughing]. And then I started in my profession as a nursery teacher. I immediately got a job. (1st interview, translated from German)

The reunification had been the most decisive transition period for Barbara, as it did not only open up new professional perspectives, but also the chance for a completely new way of life, including political freedom. In this given point in time, the later had a much higher value than any form of career planning or obtaining a specific qualification. Later, Barbara sought to enhance her career chances through significant engagement with learning. When this could not be realised (because she was rejected to follow a four-year specialisation course), Barbara experienced a major drawback. That a younger, less experienced colleague was accepted into the course instead of her was particularly bitter for Barbara. She is now exploring alternatives since she regards engagement with continuing learning essential to move on. However, Barbara also perceives that her resources and opportunities are very limited.
Silke presents an interesting case of balancing through integration. Married with two children (six and eight years), she works as an advertising scriptwriter, combining a regular part-time job of 16 hours per week (two days) with the equivalent number of working hours as a freelancer. While the freelance work is irregular and flexible, the regular job requires a weekly commute of 200km distance each way. When the children were small, Silke used to take them with her to the office and nurse them at the workplace. This was partly to secure continuous employment as interruptions could be risky for people working in the creative industries, but also to secure an income for the family as her husband at that time did not have a regular job. Her narrative evolves around being stretched between work and the family, high learning and creativity demands at work, and the notion of regretting not having had enough time for the children:

> Well, and because I don't have these regular working hours it is very difficult for me to distance myself from upcoming requests. Then I pick up the phone with one child on my lap and the other one crawling about and then they ask me to quickly come up with a new headline. This is really, really difficult. (1st interview, translated from German)

Transitions and Learning Structured around Securing Stable Employment

Another dominant theme, which could turn into primarily structuring women's work transitions, was framed around job security. In this context, transitions were usually strategic, well planned, initiated purposefully, and sometimes backed up by professional help (such as career counselling services) and further learning that could become instrumental for facilitating job transitions. Particularly against growing uncertainties over job stability on the German labour market since the 1990s, and more prominent since the global economic crisis in 2008, several narratives focused on the efforts of securing permanent employment, most commonly after having worked on the basis of temporary contracts for a long time or having experienced rationalisation. Where securing stable employment had turned into a major concern, this could result in compromising, such as accepting a less satisfying job, less challenging work or lower wages.

Sabine, for example, featured such a compromising strategy. She has been working as a paediatric nurse with the same employer in a rehabilitation centre for over 23 years, but in different positions. The driver for changing positions has been the aim to balance work and private life (Sabine has no children) by working part-time. About 20 years ago Sabine obtained the desired ‘privileged permanent position', working 30 hours per week and day shifts only. However, her professional interest has been to specialise in speech therapy. Thus, several times she tried to redirect her career and started a further training course. Ultimately, reluctance to give up her current employment position has been the main reason why she never completed any of the alternative career pathways started. Despite considerable dissatisfaction at work, the wish to keep stable employment has locked her into the current job situation. Today, she considers herself too old for a career change.

Also Brigitte's and Anna's transitions were geared towards securing a permanent job. Brigitte is married with a 10-year-old daughter and was the only woman in the sample who had worked continuously full-time with the exception of one year when she was on parental leave. She represents the working culture of the former GDR with a high female labour force participation rate backed by comprehensive childcare. Her pronounced work orientation is the result of the cultural embedding, own professional dedication, financial pressures and expectations of her employer:

> Well, it's both [financial and personal reasons]. This is how I grew up, I haven't seen anything else. That's the typical GDR-child, both parents working full-time, both grandparents having worked full-time, and, thank God, that in my life it could also always be adjusted that way, that it has always worked out for me as well. (1st interview, translated from German)

Brigitte finished school at the time of the reunification and trained at a Berufsakademie specialising in commerce and economics.[10] After completion, she found a job as a management assistant at a small company which, unfortunately, closed down. To not become unemployed, Brigitte started a nine-month quality assurance training programme during which she became pregnant. After one year of parental leave, she redirected her career and started as a team assistant at the local employment agency where she gradually moved into the position of vocational counsellor. Achieving her current position involved several application processes, job changes, training-on-the-job and learning, and considerable risk taking.[11] Brigitte sees her career as progressively advancing against her own strategic approach, her learning commitment and having confidence in her skills, but also accepting to take risks. While her employer wants to put her on a career track, she feels that she still needs to give priority to her family, recognising that a further promotion would be highly competitive and require significant learning and time commitment. Interestingly, when the follow-up interview was conducted, Brigitte had changed positions to move on in her career, but had concurrently reduced her working hours by 20%.

Also Anna's narrative evolved around having always had temporary contracts, which are common in the social services. Although with growing work experience Anna has become more confident in getting her contracts renewed, constant uncertainty makes her feel uncomfortable. Anna has had several career changes, starting off as a trained tax consultant to then retrain as a nursery teacher. After having worked for five years with the catholic youth association and for four years in a kindergarten, she recently changed jobs to work in a nursery for children with special needs. During the first interview Anna was pregnant. When the follow-up interview was

conducted she had just gone on maternity leave. Her new family situation combined with anxiety over job insecurity and future professional prospects. On the one hand, Anna was eager to get back to work, trusting in an oral job offer from her last employer. On the other hand, she had mixed feelings about how realistic this was:

> Well, in the meantime [I feel uncomfortable], yes, because you constantly have to, with my former employer it was common that every year in April I had to register as unemployed and had to fill out all the papers over and over again. And each time it was not sure whether they could keep me over the summer or whether I'd have to leave .. Usually I got some positive feed-back just in time, ‘ok, we do have enough children this year, it looks good'. But the feeling of discomfort and anxiety remained. Although for some parts I've also become relaxed about it, because I believe that somehow I'll always find a new job. (2nd interview, translated from German)

Transitions and Learning Structured around Seeking Professional Fulfilment

Professional fulfilment was identified as another driver of transitions. Participants who particularly perceived their vocational specialisation and/or current job as a compromise, or had made compromises in the past, emphasised that self-fulfilment at work was very important, thus striving to continuously optimise the level of their work satisfaction. This was commonly linked to a strong commitment to learning, too. Thereby, combining dependent employment with freelance work could be one possible arrangement when striving for job satisfaction, as well as balancing work and family commitments (like in Silke's case as described earlier). In these cases, income levels and employment stability could become less important than self-realisation. Another pattern linked to professional fulfilment was ‘being in search', whereby the search process could also result in career changes, which would typically involve another formal qualification or substantial retraining.

Sandra's career narrative, for example, evolved around exploring different professional directions on the one hand, but also trying to establish continuity in her working life in parallel with building a family. She is married and has two almost grown-up children. After school, Sandra spent some time travelling, studying (but never completing any of the courses started), and working in different jobs before she trained and worked as masseur for some years. After having been on parental leave for five years, she retrained as speech therapist. Sandra has now been working for about 10 years on a part-time basis (30 hours per week) as a speech therapist, but also started a comprehensive course in alternative medicine, which, however, she thus far has not been able to complete due to financial restrictions, time conflicts, and the major learning efforts required. As her husband has health problems, Sandra foresees that she will become the breadwinner in the family in the longer term:

> Well, [laughing] at least when I was young there was this kind of actionism. When I was in school, studying, quitting University studies to start something completely new. To be able to look at things from a distance . And then I had this relatively long period where I perceived myself as significantly contributing to the household income for my family. And as a consequence, I displayed much more continuity than it probably would have normally been the case [laughing]. And now I have the impression that this period is coming to an end as my son is finishing school next year and also my daughter will move out of the home in the near future. This will give me more freedom and flexibility. (1st interview, translated from German)

Also Karin's narrative evolved around being in search of what to do professionally and trying out different things, not to make a career, but for professional fulfilment. Karin had several transitions and started different career pathways including studying. Most pathways she started she never completed. As an alternative to working she stayed home with the children for eight years before a vocational orientation seminar made her work with a restorer in a museum. She eventually did an internship at the theatre as prop master, which she is still doing today in a combination of dependent and freelance work.

Fatma underwent several formal trainings to redirect her career, mainly to make her work situation compatible with her family commitments. She initially trained and worked as a furrier, then had her first child, and then went back to work after parental leave based on a retraining to

work as seamstress. After some years she had twins, stayed home for a while, and then started to work as a translator for public institutions (e.g. at the court), which she did for about 14 years. As this job involved a lot of travelling, Fatma wanted to redirect her career. After a one year orientation phase, she started another three years of training as an elderly care nurse, which she completed at the age of 40. Since then she has been working in this profession. This last training period has been especially demanding and challenging. In the case of Fatma, a high learning commitment and the courage to start anew have been the main drivers to redirect her career. Having spent nine years in vocational training, she represents a case of high investment in learning to facilitate horizontal mobility.

Seeking self-fulfilment through working, however, could also result in work centrality to the extent that individuals prioritise their work over their own well-being. For both Anke and Claudia, working at a very high rate led to burnout and a major personal crisis when they were in their 40s. After school, Anke went straight into automobile manufacturing, assembling parts and striving to make as much money as possible through piecework in the factory. For the next 25 years she worked for different suppliers in different regions of the country. She also completed several specialist trainings (including a distance learning course in electrical engineering), partly based on her technical interest, but also to compensate for her status as an unskilled worker. Several transitions and job changes were driven by seeking to earn more money (which Anke described as ‘money addiction') up to a point where she worked extra hours continuously. During all these years she neglected her two children over working until five years ago when she had a burnout and had to stop working altogether. At the time of the first and follow-up interview, Anke was in an activation programme working in a cultural institution, which she valued as a key learning experience that helped her stabilising her life.

Claudia had followed a steady, progressive career path as bank clerk for 22 years before initiating a major transition to redirect her career. As a first step, Claudia obtained a university entry qualification (Abitur) through an adult education programme. She then studied German language and journalism at university, while at the same time she continued working at the bank part-time to finance her studies. Upon completing the degree, she first worked with two small IT firms as PR manager before changing to work as a service manager for a large logistics employer. During the first interview Claudia had been with this employer for four years. At the time of the follow-up interview one year later, she had had a burnout and had been made redundant. The narrative of the second interview evolved around work centrality, the wish to get back into regular employment and have a structured working day, and how she copes with the low recognition in society of somebody who is not working. Claudia represents a case of strategic investment in learning to move on in her career later in life, after having mainly complied to the role expectations of her parents and having experienced professional constraints when she was young.

Discussion

In Germany, the vocational education and training system intersects with stratified and standardised occupational routes and (fairly closed) occupational labour markets, resulting in restricted permeability between educational pathways and low levels of flexibility and mobility among the workforce as compared to many other European countries (Solga, 2008; Hanf, 2011). The historic polarisation of male-orientated dual training paths and school-based vocational training paths for women to train in female-connoted domains perpetuates job stratification by gender. The educational system thus has an influence on women's labour force participation by tracking them into certain occupational training paths (predominantly school-based vocational training in the social, educational and care domains, as well as low status dual craft and sales professions) early in their career that reduce their overall earning potentials and future career chances. Furthermore, family policies and the limited availability of childcare make it difficult for women to pursue a continued career once they have children. This combines with the tax system and gender pay gap that support women's secondary wage earner position in the family, resulting in low levels of social security and retirement benefits.

The outcomes of the qualitative study with women in their mid-career confirm that these factors highly influence women's labour market participation patterns and individual careers.

Looking at the women's transitions and their learning and career pathways, disruptive careers and part-time employment were mainly a result of family commitments, but also of restricted possibilities for continuous, full-time employment in the social, health and educational fields. This may explain why job and career changes among the participants were quite common, leading to various transitions that were perceived as challenging and not always easy to manage, but were also sometimes used as an opportunity to redirect careers. ‘Forced' transitions were often a result of unexpected changes due to economic or political restructuring, such as the German reunification, which opened up completely new career options (Barbara), but also resulted in competition and the downgrading of East German qualifications (Gabi). Other structural factors included rationalisation and lay-offs (Anna, Brigitte, Claudia) and the decline of an occupational field (Fatma). Burnout as an experience of personal and professional crises (Anke, Claudia) could equally induce dramatic transitions and a radical disruption.

In the examples, structuring transitions towards balancing work and the family with prioritising family commitments over their own professional development and employment was accompanied by little career ambitions. Engagement with learning was moderate and primarily geared towards securing part-time or marginal employment (Nina, Andrea, Barbara, Gabi) or compensating for lack of employment opportunities (Britta). One woman (Silke) combined high levels of flexible and freelance work, which was due to the demands of working in the creative industries and the wish for professional fulfilment and keeping continuous employment. The women in this subgroup had several job changes, but did not change their professional domain. Some also had switched to less challenging work.

The women whose transitions were structured around employment stability had worked almost continuously either full-time or extended part-time. They had no or only one child as compared to the first group with women having up to three children. Learning, including both basic and continuous formal training, was strategically used to facilitate career redirections and job changes, with job changes mainly being driven towards improving work and employment conditions (Sabine), including securing permanent employment (Anna) and/or career advancement (Brigitte). In the case of Anna and Brigitte this involved moving to more challenging work that required significant training-on-the-job and some employer-directed training, too. However, both Anna and Brigitte did not see themselves advancing further in their career, Anna because she had just started a family-related interruption making her anticipate a significant professional drawback, and Brigitte because she wanted to give more attention to her family and was not (yet) ready to follow a competitive track.

Women, who emphasised professional fulfilment, often in combination with a job that could be compatible with their family situation, commonly used transitions and learning to facilitate both a process of reflection and a career change in terms of moving into another professional domain. As the German labour market usually requires a formal qualification to realise such a career change, these women demonstrated persistent engagement with learning up to a point where they underwent several formal qualification programmes (Sandra, Fatma, Claudia), some having spent up to nine years in formal training.[12] Only in the case of Claudia, the training investments in her mid-career were geared towards career advancement, which, however, had not developed as expected when the second interview was conducted as she had been dismissed after having experienced a major professional crisis.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations and lack of representativeness, the explorative study with women in their mid-career suggests that women qualified at the intermediate skills level are much more likely to move horizontally in their career than vertically. While vertical mobility may or may not be based on further training and commitment to learning, depending on the promotional practices, horizontal mobility requires significant engagement with learning due to the structure of closed occupational entry requirements and the gate keeping practices of the German labour market as presented in section 2 of the article. Hence, realising a career change can be considered particularly difficult as it usually requires a formal qualification in the field and/or significant retraining. Career advancement within a given occupational domain, by contrast, may be based on well-trodden

career paths and/or seniority principles. As these practices commonly consider continuous employment records, they are less likely to be beneficial for women, given their disruptive career patterns due to sometimes fairly long family-related interruptions (in the sample of up to 10 years).
Apart from horizontal mobility requiring considerable learning efforts and retraining, continuing training and further specialisation is commonly expected in the female-dominated social, health and educational fields. That this training is typically initiated and paid for by the employee rather than being employer-directed (which is the dominant mode in industry) also came out strongly in the narratives. Pressures for continuing learning thereby put the majority of the interviewed women working in these professions under strain (represented in the sample were nursery education, physiotherapy, speech therapy and elderly care). Additionally, the women referred to limited resources, in particular financial and time constraints, as a major obstacle not only to secure employment and/or move on in their professional field, but also to initiate a career change. Not receiving adequate support (such as information about training opportunities, availability of childcare) to be able to follow particular training courses was also mentioned to be a hindrance.
It is commonly argued that women need to get additional training and skill-updating after family responsibilities have lessened to be able to compete in the labour force on equal footing with those who have had continuous careers (see, for example, Hofmeister et al, 2006). Hence, continuing training and learning support are seen as a key means to alter the tracking effect of education into gendered labour market structures later in their career. The study indicates, however, that despite considerable learning efforts, the disadvantages women encounter on the labour market persist. Considering the learning and career trajectories of the male participants of the study, which did not form part of the presented analysis, it becomes clear that qualifications alone cannot alter welfare policy and labour market structures. The men in their mid-career tended to display continuous and progressive careers, despite several job changes and periods of unemployment. Their career progressions thereby were typically based on a further qualification or specialisation (e.g. the Meister qualification) supported and partly paid for by the employer. While the men were not higher qualified than the women when starting their career, they had advanced further in their mid-career, mainly by having followed traditional career progression routes. Such possibilities for career progression, often combined with employer support, may explain why the men were also less likely to have major career redirections than their female counterparts.
As has been shown, the women's careers, by contrast, tended to slow down after some years of labour market participation and became disruptive once they had children. This suggests that women's educational attainment and work qualification pay off early in their career, but cannot alter labour market disadvantages after longer periods of family-related interruptions that often resulted in a major career drawback. Against a background of German family policies and traditional gender models which couples revert to when it comes to organising household and caring responsibilities (BMFSFJ, 2011), women need to mobilise considerable resources to get back on a career track. The empirical investigation has shown that the learning opportunities and mechanisms available are unlikely to alter this pattern as they mainly facilitate horizontal mobility and/or the stabilisation of precarious employment in the female-dominated social services.

Notes

[1.] In a cross-national study, Bimrose et al (2014) compared female careers of older women in Australia, Argentina, Germany, Italy, England and South Africa.

[2.] Until 1977, married women were by German law expected to focus on (unpaid) caregiving and housework and to subordinate their career. They also needed their husband's permission to enter into paid employment (Buchholz & Grunow, 2006, p. 65).

[3.] The concept of gendered careers considers that men and women are characterised by different material, cultural and social resources, not least due to their different forms of participation in society's division of labour (paid and unpaid work). Of special interest are hence differences in female and male labour force participation and men's and women's access to and choice of vocational tracks, industries, jobs and hierarchical positions. Furthermore, gender is conceptualised as a social construct

which plays out in action – as a reproduction of role expectations and ascribed competences that vary between women and men. Finally, gender is reproduced at the structural level, embedded in institutions such as education and training routes, living wage constructions and the standardisation of working time.

[4.] Between 1996 and 2009, the share of female part-time employment as part of total female employment rose from 50.8% to 70.3% (Wolf, 2010).

[5.] Nursing has been subject to various national and European Union (EU) regulations during the last years, which has led to considerable convergence in terms of occupational profiles and qualification standards (Brockmann, 2011).

[6.] The EU-27 average gender pay gap is at 16%. Of the 27 countries, the gender pay gap is only bigger in Austria, Estonia and the Czech Republic than in Germany (OECD, 2013a, p. 257).

[7.] The overall German sample comprised 11 male and 14 female participants. For this article, only the interviews with the female workers are being considered.

[8.] Illustrative quotes in section 4 are taken from both the first and the follow-up interviews, regarding both interviews as complementing one narrative.

[9.] This approach draws on the problem-centred interview initially developed and applied as a qualitative method of life course research (Heinz, 2002).

[10.] The Berufsakademie offers a dual work and study programme of three years available only in the federal states of Saxony and Baden-Württemberg. It is based on an employment contract with a company and a study contract with the Berufsakademie. The final degree can be compared to a German dual Bachelor degree.

[11.] Brigitte had to apply as an external candidate, which required quitting her job in order to be considered. If not selected, she would have become unemployed.

[12.] Moving into another occupational domain as career changer by means of training-on-the-job can be considered the exception in Germany.

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SIMONE R. HAASLER is a senior researcher and lecturer at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research interests include labour markets and training systems, learning, careers and identity. Before joining the University of Bremen in 2001 she worked as Education Specialist for the Human Development Network of the World Bank in Washington, DC, USA.
Correspondence: haasler@uni-bremen.de